

# Thoughts on censorship

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Recently I've seen two articles on Hacker News, both censorship related: one about Twitter and one about the Great Firewall of China:

- Adventures in Twitter Censorship<sup>[^1]</sup>
- Great Firewall rising: How China wages its war on the Internet<sup>[^2]</sup>

**Forewords: I'm very well aware that there are brutal differences, especially that you'll probably face jail in China for criticizing things you're not allowed to, but still: the Twitter paper was received as a "nah, that's a glitch in caching", even though the evidence indicates something else, where the China article got the attention of "how awful".**

But recently I've seen disturbing trends in the 'western' world. In theory, we have the right of free speech, the right to express an opinion, but during the past few years, this idea is becoming... flawed.

Flawed from both sides: from the people, the expressing side and from the provider/receiver side as well.

## Step 1: The troll driven censorship

10-15 years ago if I heard the word troll in internet context, that usually meant mocking, lightly disturbing or at max uncultivated comments and reactions - but things like doxing, actual harassment, bullying was not really around.

Then suddenly something changed. Maybe it's the amount of people gaining internet access; or the general frustration that has been building up since approximately the 2009 financial crisis; maybe it was GamerGate; maybe something else, I'm not sure. But the online situation had changed, and I'm not the only one noticing it for sure; see Kevin Marks note [How did Twitter become the hate speech wing of the free speech party?](#) as an example, and this place I'm suddenly not familiar with.

Obviously this behaviour is not tolerated so the countermeasures are leading to tools similar to spam protection systems - but instead of filtering relatively harmless - highly unneeded, yes, but harmless - advertisement, it's now being applied to real comments, real people. Most of them deserve it - for now. Unfortunately these tools are easy to turn around and to use as an abusive weapon.

*If you disagree with my reasoning, let me refer to [Death Note](#): the book, where you write down the name of someone, who will die. This is a tool that can easily be seen as a tool of justice, however, once you eliminate all the bad guys, where bad is according to the law, you won't be able to stop. You'll eliminate everyone that goes against a moral code, ending up in a brutal anti-utopia, where a single bad word can cause your death.*

People also seem to become more and more sensitive, especially when it's about criticism. For example, if you question someone why are they not delivering what they promised in their crowdfunding, that person should not be addressed as a hater - that is valid criticism, one of the cornerstones of free speech. There are no nationalities online; the digital land is one single, gigantic place. Ask a British, a German and a Japanese the same question, which they would want to oppose; the reactions would probably be *Interesting idea*, from the British, *I don't like it* from the German, and an *OK-ish* from the Japanese. The book [When Cultures Collide](#) has more details on this. We tolerate cultural differences in the 'real' world, we should do the same online, first assuming the one you're having an issue with may just be from a different culture. If it turns out to be wrong, and that they meant to be rude, you have an issue, but that's not always the case.

## Step 2: The law based censorship

When I started writing this post, I jumped on Flickr and searched for 'censorship' pictures with Creative Commons license, to have a picture for this post. For my surprise, I've bumped into something surprisingly relevant, from 2007:

I love Flickr - the very subjective view of a German Flickr user on the disaster[<sup>7</sup>]

The decision to change the Flickr experience in Germany was never about censorship - it was made to try to ensure that Yahoo! Germany was in compliance with local legal restrictions. In fact, we're all getting really uncomfortable that the words "flickr" and "censorship" are being jammed together with increasing frequency because that is *so far* from the direction we're trying to move in.

The central problem is that Germany has much more stringent age verification laws than its neighbouring countries and specifies much harsher penalties, including jail time, for those with direct responsibility (in our case, it would be our colleagues in the German offices and we're not willing to make a call that has that kind of consequence for them).

So: because of laws in Germany, Flickr had to introduce filtering. Apparently, people raised their voice, because at that time, the internet had a strong sense of justice. But in theory, those laws are there for the protection of citizens, which leads us to the next thing:

## Step 3: The "it's for you" censorship

The UK government had recently (2013) introduced laws that binds Internet providers to block content<sup>[^8]</sup>. It was told to be a crucial step for our safety, because extreme content, porn and paedophiles are bad, and if you oppose this bill, you're supporting paedophiles.

Even if you only look at they way it's worded it's clearly flawed, yet the bill passed, and now, while no one is admitting it, there is censorship in the UK.

There is a strong chance that the Chinese censorship is communicated the same way inside China. Would you oppose it? Have you opposed the UK one?

## Step 4: The trusted censorship

The government-based for your own goods next evolution step is already present in Facebook, in Instagram, and in many other similar services, and it's pretty straightforward: you are not allowed to post content we do not allow in the Terms & Condition you've agree to.

Here, check these: Facebook's Community Standards<sup>[9]</sup>.

The huge issue with these services is that for an unknown reason, people trust them. The majority accepts that you can't post certain things, that you need to use your own name, and it's all fine. *A small amount of people with a different mindset are fighting the wrong war, where they form a coalition to force Facebook to allow non-real names<sup>[10]</sup> instead of leaving the whole thing behind, slowly reducing the power of Facebook, but this is another story. At least they are fighting.*

And we've arrived to our final stage:

## Step 5: The self-induced censorship

All of these lead to a very sad situation: self restrictions.

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This is different from the Chinese censorship, especially because you can't bypass it.

## Summary

Free speech and freedom is not about criticising without consequences. It's not about misusing your options, going from victim to revenge seeker. It's not about accepting regulations when someone is stating to be good for you.

Free speech is scepticism, asking the questions scientists ask; for the purpose of perfection, to help a topic to move on. This should be without restrictions, but with politeness and respect.

## Links

1. <https://news.ycombinator.com/item?id=10408145>
2. <https://news.ycombinator.com/item?id=10456270>
3. <http://www.kevinmarks.com/twitterhatespeech.html>
4. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Death\\_Note](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Death_Note)
5. [https://medium.com/@indie\\_rem/it-s-the-end-of-the-indie-as-we-know-it-b7f049ca5cdd#.u03w7p3sb](https://medium.com/@indie_rem/it-s-the-end-of-the-indie-as-we-know-it-b7f049ca5cdd#.u03w7p3sb)
6. <https://www.amazon.com/dp/1904838022/?tag=petermolnar-21>
7. <http://www.franztoo.de/?p=332>
8. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/parents-asked-if-adult-websites-should-be-blocked>
9. <https://mbasic.facebook.com/communitystandards/>
10. <https://boingboing.net/2015/10/06/global-coalition-tells-faceboo.html>

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